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Washo Peyote Songs

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The Washo

THE Washo people of Nevada and California have been described linguistically as a small Hokan-speaking group among the Shoshonean-speaking peoples of the Great Basin (Kroeber 1907; Lowie 1939). They formerly inhabited a relatively abundant territory extending from Honey Lake in the north to Antelope Valley and Sonora Pass in the south, and from the Pinenut Range east of Carson Valley in Nevada to Lake Tahoe and the summit of the Sierra-Nevada Mountains of California in the west. Present population is variously reported at between 400 and 1000 individuals; the figures on file at the Nevada Indian Agency in Stewart, Nevada, support the larger estimates. The Washo were formerly distributed in small, band-like communities composed of semi-exogamous extended families which made use of the full range of their diversified setting in hunting and gathering, and were thus a highly mobile population. In recent times, however, there has been an increasing tendency to cluster in small colonies in or near the older white settlements of Nevada and California, and on the few remaining allotment acres provided by the government many years ago. The major source of money-income for families is provided by those members who are employed as laborers on road-construction gangs, ranches, and farms. A few women work as servants in the towns and resorts. There is little use of the land for agricultural purposes, while hunting, fishing, and gathering still provide an important part of subsistence. Despite the often drastic conditions of acculturation during the past one hundred years, the Washo have maintained considerable homogeneity as an ethnic and cultural minority.

The Peyotists

Peyotism among the Washo is scarcely more than twenty years old, having been introduced by one Ben Lancaster, a member of the tribe who had learned the ritual and ideology during a long sojourn among eastern and southern tribes. In 1936 he started the proselyting which resulted in the creation of an enthusiastic group of Washo and Paiute adherents during the period 1936–39. By 1940, however, the movement had already become defunct, and meetings were no longer held in Washo territory. Ben Lancaster continued to preside over the embittered and secretive remnants of the cult, which consisted of a handful of loyal Paiute and a very few Washo members. He also erected an

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secure and prepare these (hooked pole, roasting of nuts, carrying baskets); mano and metate; twined basketry techniques and basket form (e.g., winnowing trays); temporary brush house; antelope hunting method by 'charming'; private ownership of clumps of piñon trees."

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Washo winter use of the highlands had been of research interest in recent years. In an archeological survey report Heizer and Elsasser (1953, 18) state that "permanent occupation at elevations over 5500 feet in prehistoric times would be hazardous or impossible." Continuing the project, Elsasser (1960, 26) considered 4000 ft. the approximate dividing line between summer and winter habitation for the California side, and he stated that "in aboriginal times . . . little or no land, even at the highest elevations was unknown to the Indians." From ethnographic evidence Freed (1954, 1) stated in reference to Lake Tahoe (6275 ft. elevation), that "if there was to be no pine nut crop, a family might choose to winter at the lake."

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The Freed Survey of Lake Tahoe

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Freed (1954) conducted a survey of Washo habitation sites in the Lake Tahoe area by interrogation of Washo informants. The map accompanying the present paper gives the location of sites discussed and mapped by Freed. The sites are numbered 1 through 31.(see note 2 for further discussion of the map).

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Freed's site #6 is a deposit of red clay near the lake; #10 is at Rubicon Springs (the mineral water of which was used for internal disorders), which was on a trade route into central California; #16 is a cave at the foot of Stanford Rock where hunters sometimes stayed; #17 is a camp among oak trees; #27 (26-Do-1) is the cave at Cave Rock used for shelter; and #29, #30 and #31 were resting places rather than campsites. The rest of the sites were used primarily in connection with fishing, although hunting and gathering were additional considerations. Freed (1954) says:

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> "The Washo spent the summer months fishing in the streams around the lake, each family moving to another river whenever it saw fit but usually confining itself to a particular section of the lake's perimeter . . . the camps were usually in open spaces close to the lake shore. . . . A camp might consist of five or six circular windbreaks (gado), each housing a family.

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"A permanent bedrock mortar was near each camping site . . . portable property was scanty. It was a hard climb from the valley to the lake and the Washo took mainly bows and arrows, a mano and metate, a few necessary baskets and their fish harpoons. . . . The fish were speared from a fish blind. . . . At a suitable place on a stream the Washo would build a stone dam fine enough to catch everything except small minnows."

One thing to note here is that the Washo were stream fishers. They never went out onto the lake with rafts or boats of any kind and they never used a hook and line from the shore.[1] The hook and line is reported for stream fishing, but was not nearly as important as spearing and netting. The balsa boat was used on Washoe Lake to drive young ducks, but was never taken to Lake Tahoe.

The d'Azevedo Survey

In 1955 and 1956 d'Azevedo collected the names and descriptions of 249 habitation sites and geographical locations in the extended territory used by the Washo. Though not published, much of this information has been made available through the files of the California Archaeological Survey at Berkeley, and the present writer has made frequent reference to an unpublished manuscript (d'Azevedo, 1956) containing this material.

The survey is similar to Freed's survey for Lake Tahoe except that it presents a systematic coverage of Washo land-use and knowledge of terrain, rivers, lakes and natural resources over an area of about 13,000 sq. mi. This knowledge is so intricately woven into Washo folklore and mythology that a long tenure in this region is indicated for them. Furthermore, it would appear that the territorial "boundaries" now designated for the Washo ignore large areas in California which they at least shared with the Miwok and Maidu, and areas to the east which were shared with the Paiute.

The Heizer and Elsasser Survey

Heizer and Elsasser (1953) reported on 26 sites in their archeological survey of the high Sierras in the vicinity of Lake Tahoe. Two similar yet distinct archeological complexes were seen in the materials from their survey -- Martis and Kings Beach. The Martis complex type site is Pla-5 in Martis Valley, along Martis Creek, about 5 mi. northwest of Lake Tahoe.

[1] [footnote appears on p. 93 -- Analyst]

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[825] had encountered and display understandable pride at having conquered them. "Them old bucks that live around here . . . they are smarter than people" was a frequent comment. In varying degrees this attitude was evident among other Washo men. Details of hunts or feats of hunting prowess which occurred
[732] 40 years ago were recalled again and again. The contempt many of them felt
[888] for an aged, usually drunk, and half-blind claimant for tribal "chieftainship" was often explained by a statement like: "He never hunted or nothing . . . so don't believe nothing he tells you about it. He just hung around camp and didn't do nothing."

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825 A number of Washo expressed what might be described as an enmity toward sheep. One might interpret this as an evidence of the common contempt for sheep in contrast to cattle. However, upon exploring this attitude, I began to feel that my informants viewed sheep as competitors who ate valuable food plants and spoiled good gathering areas. There would seem to be little difference between sheep and sheepowners in the Washo mind. If there
[262] is any difference it appears that more hostility is directed toward the animals. Cook (1941, 48) reports a distinct aversion to mutton among the Washo.

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241 One might explain the present low frequency of agriculture and husbandry among the Washo as simply a result of the historic and political factors
311 that left them without land of sufficient quality or quantity to permit agriculture or husbandry. However, an examination of the course of Washo history
177 since the appearance of whites in this area suggests that other factors play an important role in this situation.

231 Aboriginally the Washo kept dogs and used at least some of them for hunting. However, the number was small because of depredations of predators on litters of puppies. One informant recalls being told of collars made of flint points which were worn by dogs to protect them from mountain lions. In addition to dogs, eagles were trapped and kept for ceremonial purposes. All modern Washo are aware that one old man in early historic times attempted to keep captive fledgling eagles on cradleboards so they could be transported easily and raised to maturity. The experiment seems to have been a failure.

825 D'Azevedo (personal communication) reports that older informants told him of cutting the top boughs from trees in the winter to supply browse for deer herds and thus encourage the animals to remain in the area. Whether this was an aboriginal practice or an inspiration based on white husbandry practices is not clear.

241 Nor was agriculture any further developed than husbandry. Tobacco was not grown, nor was any action taken to encourage the growth of wild